

8-1-2012

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## Recommended Citation

Middleton, Townsend (2012) "The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas: Local Attachments and Boundary Dynamics by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gerard Toffin, Eds.; Reviewed by Townsend Middleton," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 31: No. 1, Article 19.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol31/iss1/19>



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# THE POLITICS OF BELONGING IN THE HIMALAYAS: LOCAL ATTACHMENTS AND BOUNDARY DYNAMICS

BY JOANNA PFAFF-CZARNECKA AND  
GERARD TOFFIN, EDS.

New Delhi: Sage, 2011. 380 p. ISBN: 9788132105244  
(Volumes 4 of the series *Governance, Conflict and Civic Action*)

REVIEWED BY TOWNSEND MIDDLETON

Recent years have seen “identity” become a source of growing scholarly dissatisfaction. With political interest groups, governments, and academics alike endowing the term with a dizzying array of meanings and socio-political im/possibilities, researchers are now seeking alternatives to the essentialized, seemingly ubiquitous, notion of “identity.” “Belonging” has emerged as one promising alternative.

With *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas*, editors Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gerard Toffin and a range of dynamic contributors bring these concerns to the shifting, often-jagged political landscapes of Nepal and Himalayan India. The intervention is timely. Across the Himalayas, “identity” has become a master-trope of national and subnational politics. In India, identity remains at the core of past and present sub-nationalist movements for autonomy, recognition, and social justice. Likewise, after multiple People’s Movements and a decade-long Maoist insurgency, identity has become the central vehicle for demanding and imagining a “new” Nepal. Certainly this is no time for researchers to turn their back on identity’s regional articulations. However, the term’s multifarious meanings and uses do give reason to explore alternative analytics.

*The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas* sets for itself precisely this task. Contributors from a range of disciplines (anthropology, international studies, religious studies, sociology, etc.) develop case studies from the across the Himalayas of Nepal and India. The diverse essays offer compelling glimpses of what the study of belonging might look like in the South Asian context. The volume begins with a conceptually driven Introduction that makes the case for belonging being an alternative—and better—analytic. Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin here frame belonging as distinct, yet dialectically constituted by identity. Belonging, they tell us, is “thicker” and “cosier” than identity. It involves “perceptions

and performances of *commonality*; a sense of *mutuality* and more or less formalized modalities of collective *allegiance*; as well as material and immaterial attachments and a sense of *entitlement*” (xii). This conceptualization resonates with a growing body of literature which sees belonging as an emotional, felt, and affective phenomenon—at once intimate, social, and pregnant with political potential (see, e.g. Geschiere 2009; Probyn 1996; Ignatieff 2001; Yuval-Davis et al 2006).

Conveniently organized into three parts – I. Territoriality and Indigeneity; II. Socio-religious Bonding; III. Commitments and Conflicts—the volume’s fourteen chapters provide diachronic and diverse analyses of the shifting contours of belonging in the Himalayas. Krauskopff and Gellner’s essays examine the effects of Nepali state formation on sentiments of belonging. Through a consideration of “place” in Western Nepal, Krauskopff charts the ways in which the policies of the nineteenth century Rana regime and subsequent governments have “legalized, frozen, or obliterated other forms of belonging ... [thereby] essentializing belonging and fixing its limits” (38). David Gellner notes that in Nepal, “[i]ndigeneity and belonging are now unstoppable political forces” (69). Other essays interrogate the entanglements of state formation and belonging from different angles. De Sales examines the transformations of village belonging within the contested landscape of development and Maoism in Nepal. Dana and Michaels shift the attention to religion by questioning how belongings (material and experiential) obtain in the pilgrimage sites of Muktinath and Pashupatinath respectively.

Elsewhere, the contributors engage the sub-nationalist contexts of India. Pandey’s work on Nagaland raises timely questions on how the creation of a separate state does and does not affect local and national notions of belonging. Joshi and Sax bring similar concerns to the more recently created state of Uttarakhand. Berti’s essay demonstrates the value of nuanced ethnography by documenting the micropolitical practices by which local belongings are adjudicated in the district courts Himachal Pradesh. Smadja’s discussion on the Kaziranga National Park of Assam takes up the question of belonging through the thematic frames of political ecology. Other contributors contemplate how belonging develops translocally (see, for example, Gaenszle’s analysis of Nepali nationalism’s Indian origins; Campbell’s work with Tamang communities on the move; and Toffin’s chapter on the transnational Krishna Pranami religious sect.)

Brought into one volume, these diverse case studies announce the flexibility, depth, and insight that an attention to belonging may bring to Himalayan Studies. Certainly, it is an attractive alternative to the problematic notion of identity. However, given the variance of these case studies, one wonders to what extent this volume has clarified what this alternative analytic entails. What exactly are we talking about when we speak of belonging? The volume’s Introduction

does valuable work distinguishing between belonging and identity in theory. But over the course of the subsequent chapters, that distinction, as well as the conceptual acuity of belonging itself, blurs considerably. We are offered numerous definitions along the way: belonging is a matter of affinity to spaces, institutions, practices, and people (77); belongings can be material objects (133-143) or affective feelings (102) (note here the English double entendre); belonging may be formally delineated through legal renderings of citizenship (102) or informally reproduced through the micro-politics of social interaction (291). All of these definitions seem apt, but with so many definitions in play, one wonders whether we are headed down an epistemologically slippery slope wherein belonging, by becoming a convenient catch-all, comes to look an awful lot like its multifarious other, identity. This would be a shame because we, indeed, are in need of more refined optics.

In breaking new ground, this volume thus provides, at once, cautionary lessons and promising leads for the future study of belonging and its politics in the Himalayas. Going forward, it will be worth emphasizing belonging's patently relational nature. Belonging's ontology, in Heideggerian terms (1962), is always a matter of being-in, being-of, or being-with. Conversely, more attention can be devoted to the politics and experiences of non-belonging. Surveying the turbulent politics of the Himalayas today, belonging's *lack* appears as much a political force as its presence. Crucially, belonging and non-belonging are best considered in tandem. After all, not being-in and of the nation-state may well be predicated on being-in and of a particular minority, place, or legal status. Figured accordingly, the question of non/belonging goes beyond simple lateral "us" vs. "them" relationalities. It also obtains in more vertical or nested frames. As a scalar phenomenon, belonging at one level may mean not-belonging at another level. Such a scalar approach promises new ways of understanding the varying orders and politics of inclusion and exclusion that define belonging in the Himalayas of India and Nepal.

As we have seen in the sub-nationalist movements of India and the acrimonious struggles for a "new Nepal," the interplays of belonging and non-belonging breed exceptionally volatile, often violent, political forms. Belonging—understood as an affective and scalar phenomenon—provides ways of rethinking the forms and intensities of politics in these charged contexts. In this regard, *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas* is best read as the beginning of a longer—and promising—conversation within Himalayan Studies about the definition and analytic utility of belonging. Along these lines, readers can look forward to the forthcoming second volume of this project, titled *Facing Globalization in the Himalayas: Belonging and the Politics of Self*. For now, we may thank the contributors for initiating a well-timed discussion of belonging as an analytic concept—and an undeniable force in the Himalayas and beyond.

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## GENDER AND GREEN GOVERNANCE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WOMEN'S PRESENCE IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY AND BEYOND BY BINA AGARWAL

New Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.  
xxvi, 488 p. : maps ; 24 cm. ISBN: 978-0199569687

## REVIEWED BY BIMBIKA SIJAPATI BASNETT

*Gender and Green Governance* by Bina Agarwal examines whether, and how, women's presence in forest governance initiatives matter for conservation, livelihoods and women's empowerment in India and Nepal. Both countries have witnessed the formation of thousands of community forestry institutions since the management of forests were devolved from the central government to local communities in the early 1990s. The general idea behind community forestry is a partnership between the state and local communities. Under this partnership, the local people accept the responsibility for the protection, management and sustainable utilization of their community forests. The government becomes an extension agent, providing advice and support to the local communities, whilst simultaneously retaining ownership of the forests being handed over.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I examines